

Notes from Dawn's Foster Mom

When Dawn died, I could not believe it. It had happened again. Dawn was my second child to die in foster care. Being a foster parent and having a child die brings into play many more dynamics than the death of a birth child. First, you have to deal with the first responders; police, paramedics, hospital personnel, the coroner, etc. Next you have social services, social workers and licensing workers. And, if that wasn't enough, you have the birth parents, who can be very hostile. First that their child was taken away and put in foster care, then they often feel the baby's death was your fault. (Remember it was not). This can be a very uncomfortable time as a foster parent. Hopefully you have a good, established relationship with that parent, which gives you the potential opportunity to share the grief of a child that you both loved and, if you wish, be included in the plans for the baby's funeral.

I have found that using a journal during difficult times can be helpful in sorting out my feelings and also, in the healing process. What follows is an excerpt of some of my thoughts and feelings that I wrote down during the months that followed Dawn's death. These thoughts and feelings are very common among foster parents who have lost a foster child to death.

- ✦ What am I going to do now? Shall I take another child? Shall I take a break from foster parenting? Shall I quit? (Can't bear the thought of that). This is not a good time to make such a big decision.
- ✦ What do I tell the other children in my home? Will they be afraid that they are going to die too?
- ✦ The memories! They pop up at the most inconvenient times. Seeing another child who resembles Dawn, hearing a siren and flashing back to that sound as I was doing CPR. When I started CPR I said out loud, "Breathe!" Later I heard a song that mentioned the word "breathe" and I fell completely apart. You never know what is going to trigger the memories.
- ✦ I don't want to get up in the morning. I'm depressed and I have no energy or drive to even get out of bed. What would I do anyway?
- ✦ If I do get another child will I be able to love and nurture him/her in the way he/she deserves? Will I be able to sleep? How will my family feel?
- ✦ I am afraid of being alone. I'm afraid to go to sleep at night. I'm afraid to think. I'm afraid Social Services will think I harmed the baby. I'm afraid they will never place another baby with me. (Very irrational, since Christopher died I have fostered 32 additional children, 18 since Dawn's death).
- ✦ I want to pack up all of her things right away so I won't have the hurt of looking at them. Well, maybe I'll leave one thing out - her favorite Minnie Mouse doll.
- ✦ I want to read or do something relaxing, but I can't seem to concentrate for any length of time. I leave the TV on all night so I won't think or feel.
- ✦ I leave a picture of her up around the house and in my wallet. Is this healthy? (I personally have found this helpful.) She was a special part of our lives. It hurts, but at the same time it feels good to be able to look at her sweet face.
- ✦ I dream about her. I dream she is still alive. I dream I am holding her and she is breathing. I dream she didn't really die and Social Services just didn't tell me, a year later they will bring her back to me. I don't like this dreaming thing.
- ✦ I don't want to hurt anymore. I don't want well-meaning friends to say thoughtless things like, "What did you expect?", "Well luckily she wasn't really yours so it won't hurt." "You can always get another child," and the most annoying to me, "I know just how you feel." Everyone processes loss and grief differently. No one knows just how you feel. This is still a painful loss, whether you gave birth to the child or not.
- ✦ Talk, talk, talk. I keep going over this. My life is full of "what ifs", "if onlys", and "I should have." I feel so miserable.
- ✦ Why???

As foster parents we have a very unique opportunity to have a large number of children in our homes. Along with this, unfortunately, it also increases the probability that loss can occur to you. Loss is no stranger to foster parents. It is part of the foster experience, knowing that these children will someday probably leave our home, back to parents, another foster home or an adoptive placement. These too, are all very painful. In time, even though it doesn't feel like it now, you will get through this and be able to make the decisions necessary about foster care and your future, that will best suit you and your family.

In Loving Memory of Christopher Albert and Dawn Rose



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